

# THE DEAF AND THEIR POSSIBILITIES

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*Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen .*

I trust I may not be thought egotistical when I begin with a word as to my personal connection with the education of the deaf.

It has been my privilege to be associated with this class of persons for more than forty years as a teacher and as an observer. I have examined the methods pursued in more than two-score of the schools for the deaf in this country, and in a greater number of schools in thirteen of the countries of Europe. I have taken careful note of the results of every method which has been made use of in every place that could be reached by travel.

Within a year I have had unusual opportunities for meeting, in personal converse, large numbers of educated deaf persons, not now in school, in Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, England, Scotland, and Ireland. From these persons, whose testimony was from their own experience, I was able to learn much of value as to the results and relative advantages of the different methods of education, and my intercourse with them was by means of a language more truly world-wide than Volapük will ever be—the natural, ideographic language of gestures; no doubt the oldest known to man, but whose antiquity is by no means a synonym of decrepitude, inexactness, or decay. For in the use of this unique means of expression mind comes into more direct contact with mind than when the barriers of arbitrary and artificial language are interposed.

Any endeavor to appreciate and understand the possibilities of the deaf must begin with an effort to comprehend—which is not an easy task—the state of mental blankness in which a child born deaf and remaining without education must necessarily continue.

The starting point, when the training of such a child is begun, is infinitely lower in the scale of mental development than that of a normal person. To such a child all the objects and living creatures around him are without names. For his own crude thoughts he has no means of verbal expression. All the phenomena and ministry of sound have no existence to him.

The high degree of intelligence, and even of social culture, which is possible to the unlettered who have all their faculties, growing out of that easy, personal intercourse which hearing and speech afford, can never be attained by a deaf-mute left to his own resources.

Some of you may remember Charles Dickens' description, in his *American Notes*, of the blind deaf-mute Laura Bridgman, in which he

speaks of her, before education, "built up, as it were, in a marble cell, impervious to any ray of light or particle of sound, with her poor white hand peeping through a chink in the wall, beckoning to some good man for help, that an immortal soul might be awakened."

Only a little less pitiable in degree, and quite the same in kind, is the condition of the deaf-mute left without education.

And yet experience has proved that, when once the helping hand of the teacher is extended, the deaf-mute's possibilities for intellectual growth are not less than those of normal persons.

In the four-score schools of the United States upward of ten thousand deaf children receive the full equivalent of the common-school education, including industrial training. Many are given high school courses of study, and a proportion greater than that in the community at large are acquiring a knowledge of the ancient and modern languages, the sciences, the higher mathematics, history, literature, economics, and philosophy, in the college which has been for many years liberally sustained for their exclusive benefit at the federal capital by the government of the United States.

In this college deaf-mutes have become fitted to be editors and publishers, to be clergymen, to enter the civil service of the government, to be teachers and heads of schools, to be architects and artists, to fill elective offices in the public service, to engage in scientific pursuits, to succeed in active business, to practice law, even before the supreme court of the United States, and to be postmasters by presidential appointment. None have as yet been elected as members of Congress, or to the Senate, but I have heard the opinion expressed that the transaction of public business might be expedited, under certain conditions, if a proportion of the federal legislators could be chosen from this class of persons.

It is possible to teach a child born deaf to speak well, and to understand the speech of others, by observing the motion of their lips. This has been done in many instances in many countries. But the conclusion often drawn from such successes, that all deaf children may do likewise, is not sustained by experience.

Success in teaching deaf-mutes to speak is a matter of gradation, and, in estimating the value of results, enthusiasm and bias on the part of the teacher often lead to serious error. A large proportion of deaf children, whose teachers assure them they have acquired the power of speech, and who can use their voices, such as they are, with considerable fluency, are conspicuous failures as speakers in the world at large.

The utterance of these, understood easily by teachers and intimate friends, is often so muffled or harsh, and so imperfect, as to repel strangers, putting the deaf person at a much greater disadvantage than if, remaining silent, he resorted to writing as a means of communication.

The testimony of the intelligent, educated deaf-mutes I met in Europe last year was unanimous and emphatic on this point, and they declared most earnestly that the practical value of speech, to many of their number, when they came to engage in their life work in the world, was greatly overestimated by their teachers.

The expression of this view was especially positive in Germany, where the oral method has prevailed exclusively, and where, quite recently, a petition, numerously signed by educated deaf persons, has been presented to the government, asking that the sign language be made use of in the schools of that country, and that instruction under the oral method be not continued with those whose success in speech is only partial.

Teachers of the deaf in Germany are coming to the support of these views as to methods, altho only a few have dared to express their opinions openly. But there is reason to believe that a revolution has begun that will, before long, bring German schools for the deaf into harmony with the great majority of the schools in America, where, happily, a combination of methods is effected, under which the capability of each pupil is carefully estimated, and that method employed which will be most helpful to the child.

There are teachers of the deaf in the United States who have urged, within the past few years, that the language of signs ought not to be used in teaching deaf-mutes, and in a few schools attempts have been made to carry out this idea.

It is, indeed, possible to teach deaf children without the use of the language of signs in the class-room or the public assembly. But the testimony of great numbers who have been so taught is that their intellectual development has been narrowed and retarded by the refusal, on the part of their teachers, to make use of that language which is theirs by nature.

My experience with the deaf and my lifelong familiarity with their peculiar language lead me to accept this testimony as the statement of a general truth, and to express the hope that the day is not distant when the natural language of the deaf will have its proper place in every school, as the German deaf-mutes demand, and as many German teachers recommend.

Did the limitations of the present hour permit, it would be interesting to discuss at some length the capabilities of that language of signs, but there is only time for me to call attention to the fact that to the totally deaf lip-reader the speech of others is nothing else than a series of silent signs. To the totally deaf the movements of the vocal organs are only signs for words, never the words themselves, so it appears that for the deaf the natural—indeed, the only practicable—substitute for the language of sound, even under the oral method, is one of signs, visible to the eye, understood by the mind only thru the power of vision. And when a

teacher, prohibiting signs of the hand and arm, which are descriptive, often presenting graphic pictures of the ideas to be expressed, and which are used and loved by the deaf the world over, limits his pupils to the restricted, often minute, and always arbitrary signs made by the mouth in speaking, is he not, by a process neither wise nor kind, narrowing the range of the mental vision of his subject from the telescopic to the microscopic?

The denial of the use of the language of signs to the deaf while in schools takes away one source of keen enjoyment and valuable instruction they can ill afford to lose, and which cannot be secured to them in any other way.

This is the giving of lectures and addresses to the whole body of pupils in a school, or a large assemblage of adults. We who hear know what pleasure comes from listening to an eloquent, earnest speaker; how the attention is absorbed and the feelings are stirred.

There is but one way of imparting this pleasure to the deaf in equal force and measure as it comes to us thru sound. This is by employing the natural, God-given language of the deaf, developed as it has been in our country thru many years of cultivation and use.

In the college it has long been the custom to give the students lectures in this language. Not only is this done by the professors, who are naturally adepts in the art of gesturing, but frequently eminent men who know not the sign language address our students thru an interpreter.

Within a short time they have had the pleasure and profit of lectures from General Greely, President Whitman, and Senator Morgan, which would have been impossible had the rule of banishing the language of signs been adopted in the college.

I am aware that it is claimed for deaf lip-readers that they can attend church and public lectures and the theater, understanding what is said as well as those do who hear. That a few of the most expert can approximate to this, under conditions quite impossible to a considerable number assembled in one place, is not denied. But nothing is more certain than that it is impossible for any large proportion of, say, two hundred deaf persons assembled in one place to follow understandingly one who attempts to address them orally.

With the substitution of the manual alphabet for the language of signs, the conditions are, perhaps, somewhat improved, as compared with those just described. But the eye strain is so much greater, the radius of vision so much smaller, and the power of expression so much restricted and diminished that the advantage lies greatly with the employment of the language of signs.

Thinking that the question may arise in the minds of some, "Does the sign language give the deaf, when used in public addresses, all that speech affords to the hearing?" I will say that my experience and observation lead me to answer with a decided affirmative. On occasions



almost without number it has been my privilege to interpret, thru signs to the deaf, addresses given in speech; I have addressed hundreds of assemblages of deaf persons in the college, in schools I have visited, and elsewhere, using signs for the original expression of thought; I have seen many more lectures and public debates given originally in signs; I have seen conventions of deaf-mutes in which no word was spoken, and yet all the forms of parliamentary proceedings were observed, and the most earnest, and even excited, discussions were carried on; I have seen the ordinances of religion administered, and the full services of the church rendered in signs; and all this with the assurance growing out of my own complete understanding of the language—a knowledge which dates from my earliest childhood—that for all the purposes above enumerated gestural expression is in no respect inferior, and is in many respects superior, to oral, verbal utterance as a means of communicating ideas.

Before turning to another subject, I wish to say to the friends of any deaf persons whose teachers, in their zeal to give them the power of speech, may have rejected the language of signs as a means of instruction, and may have advised their pupils never to learn nor to use it in a vain ambition to make them “just like hearing people,” that by such a course they have subjected them to a lifelong deprivation which can hardly be measured; the cruelty of which remains in spite of the fact that it was intended as a kindness.

In closing this brief consideration of the deaf and their possibilities, time only remains to speak in some detail of the methods used in the education of this class of persons, and to show, if possible, which methods, or what combination of methods, deserve the favor and support of the community.

There are three quite distinct methods in general use at the present time: the manual, the oral, and the auricular, which I have named in the order of their adaptability. That is to say, all deaf-mutes can be educated by the manual method, less than all by the oral, and only a small proportion by the auricular.

The last named, as will be easily understood, is employed only with those who have more or less hearing. Hearing tubes and other appliances for helping defective audition are made use of. In the seating of a class, those with the most hearing are placed farthest from the teacher. Children who possess sufficient hearing to be educated under this method have either had the power of speech before becoming deaf, or acquire it easily thru the aid of their hearing.

Such children, after a reasonable term in school, cease to be deaf-mutes in any sense, and should be enumerated in the census as persons “hard of hearing.”

Under the manual method no attempt is made to impart the power of speech to those who lack it, but thru the aid of the language of signs,

the manual alphabet, and writing, the intelligence of the children is awakened and developed, and a full command of verbal language is given, the ability to use text-books is acquired, and the door is opened to as complete a grasp of the curriculum of school and college as is possible to children and youth in the possession of all their faculties.

All the deaf, without exception, may be educated by this method, the only limitations being their lack of purpose and industry, or of mental capacity.

There are teachers of the deaf who do not hesitate to claim that all the deaf may be educated under the oral method. From remarks made near the opening of this paper you will have understood that my experience makes it impossible for me to admit the justice of this claim.

No question connected with the education of the deaf has received more careful or prolonged investigation at my hands than this. And the reason why zealous and enthusiastic teachers are misled is not far to seek.

Repeatedly, in visiting oral schools and oral classes, I have asked that all the pupils in a class be allowed to read aloud to me from a book with which they were familiar, but of the contents of which I was ignorant.

Such tests have invariably disclosed the following conditions: Certain of the children I would understand fully, others only partially, and with quite a proportion not a single word that was uttered. At my report on these last the teacher would express great surprise, and say, "Why, I understood every word," quite oblivious of the fact that the daily intercourse of the class-room gave a meaning to what to a stranger was gibberish. The proportion of children, in an oral school where all classes of the deaf are received, who would be stamped as failures under such a simple test as I have described is by no means small. And to these must be added others whose failures would be less marked, but whose success would be so limited as to suggest plainly the inadequacy of the methods pursued.

In determining, then, the matter of methods, shall it be said that, because only a small portion are capable of success under the auricular method, and a larger portion under the oral, these two methods should be abandoned and the manual alone employed, because under it alone all the deaf can be educated?

Surely this course would be far from wise; and happily a solution has been reached in the leading schools of our country which is at once scientific, practical, and in harmony with sound principles of pedagogy.

The capabilities of each child are carefully tested—often by prolonged trial—and that method applied which is suited to the peculiarities of each case.

If an amount of hearing is found above a certain minimum, the child is taught by the auricular method. If promising success in speech is gained, the oral method is chosen; and where such success is not attained, the manual method is resorted to. By this process, in a large school, the



capacity and lack thereof of every child may be considered — and humanely met — and a system of education carried forward, broader than any single method, and infinitely more elastic.

This combination of methods is known in the terms of our professional vocabulary as the "combined system," and at this time nine-tenths of the deaf children of the country are being educated thereunder.

In the light of present experience, a school for the deaf which limits itself to the employment of a single method must be regarded as inadequately equipped for doing the work that may properly be demanded of it.

This is the severe but just criticism brought against the German schools, as a whole, by eight hundred of their graduates in their petition to the emperor for reform.

No success in individual cases, nor in schools of selected pupils; no enthusiasm of well-meaning teachers, nor of others less honest, should be allowed to mislead the public, as it has often done in this matter. Lest the language just used should seem to some unwarranted, and therefore unfair, I will give a recently published utterance from one of the most prominent instructors in Germany, Edward Walther, director of the Imperial Institution at Berlin.

Tho a supporter of the oral method, Mr. Walther makes no extravagant claims for its results, and has only words of condemnation for those who do.

"Since it is hardly possible," he says, "that they deceive themselves, their object must be to deceive others." In that deception he, as an honest man, will have no part. "We must openly and candidly confess," he continues, "that all we can do is imperfect work. What nature has lavishly bestowed on the hearing person we cannot give to the deaf-mute. We cannot bestow on him a power of speech which, in clearness, euphony, and extent, *approaches* that of hearing persons. We cannot give him a means of understanding the speech of others which is anything more than a meager substitute for hearing."

And this is from the highest possible authority among living German oralists.

The deaf are not of uniform and equal capacity. No hard and fast rule can be laid down under which they are all to be educated or fail of securing an education.

Each of the methods, once bitterly opposed, has its advantages and its superior merits for certain cases.

If the public will accept the judgment of the very large majority of experienced instructors in our country, as expressed in the policy of the schools in which nearly all the deaf children of the country are being educated at this time, there will soon be no single-method schools remain-

ing to excite hopes that must be disappointed, wasting time in vain efforts to realize the unattainable. And it is no idle boast to say that the system prevailing generally in the schools of the United States for the deaf today gives far more satisfactory results, and affords the pupils more advanced and better training, than are secured in any other country.

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